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Federal Funding, Local Practice, and Teaching Art History through CETA in San Francisco

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Listening to the speakers at the "Forgotten Federal Art Legacies" convening in March 2025, I was staggered by the scope of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)'s legacy in San Francisco. So many artists and groups I knew from my upbringing in the San Francisco Bay Area and from my later scholarly study of its art history had received funding through CETA: Ruth Asawa's Alvarado Arts Workshop, painter Bernice Bing and the Scroungers' Center for Reusable Art Parts (SCRAP), and, most significant to me, the Kearny Street Workshop and curator-activist-silkscreen artist Nancy Hom. As I learned through the convening, San Francisco leveraged CETA to support a system of grassroots art making already in place. As arts administrator John Kreidler, one of the architects of the first proposal to use CETA Title VI funding to hire artists, noted, when CETA job interviewers asked artists to share their vision for serving their community, the few with good answers were often already doing so. With CETA funds put to that work, federal funding was deliberately keyed into the local, and it became, for art history, a key to understanding the local.¹

At the convening, I was intrigued to meet Hom, a former director of the Kearny Street Workshop (KSW), the "multidisciplinary Asian Pacific America arts workshop" and community activist group.² In 1976 Hom curated an exhibit at KSW on Angel Island, where Chinese migrants were detained from 1910 to 1940 under the Chinese Exclusion Act.³ Hom's exhibition, which leveraged art for Asian American activism, was held in KSW's Jackson Street Gallery. It featured casts of the Chinese-character poems that detained migrants had carved into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station. The casts were hung on boards from scavenged crates, creating an immersive, tactile approach to raising awareness about history. The exhibition helped generate momentum and community support for Angel Island's historic preservation. While I knew something about this exhibition and the artists' efforts to preserve the history of Angel Island and commemorate



Fig. 1. Nancy Hom, *Western Addition Cultural Center First Annual Summer Arts Explosion*, 1979. Silkscreen poster, 16 x 13 in. Collection of Nancy Hom; photography by Bob Hsiang

the people held there, I did not know that KSW received CETA funding at this time, nor did I know that Hom subsequently worked for CETA as a curator and educator.

While Hom is frequently identified with Asian American cultural spaces, her position as a CETA-funded curator-at-large for the San Francisco neighborhood cultural centers gave her an opportunity to work in solidarity across communities, forging connections that strengthened her ongoing practice of public service and activism (fig. 1). At the Sargent Johnson Gallery of the Western Addition Cultural Center (now the African American Art and Culture Complex), the subjects of the first exhibitions under Hom's tenure were selected by the Black community: the sculptor Sargent Johnson, himself a federal artist under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and photography by Black theater artists. Hom's third exhibition, in spring 1979, presented four Japanese American artists (Hisako Hibi, Takeshi Sugimoto, Chikara Takaha, and Kyoko Yamanouchi) and addressed the difficult history of Western Addition, including the neighborhood's division by the redevelopment of Geary Street in the 1960s.⁴ Local work in these neighborhood centers was not insular, and it challenged how American art was often siloed along gender, class, and racial lines, creating space for what the "Forgotten Federal Art Legacies" convening identified as the "Radical Artivism of CETA."

Learning about CETA's local impact through the convening inspired me to connect my research topics to broader art histories of the Bay Area. I began to think about a further idea: teaching a class on the art of the Bay Area for Bay Area students, with whom I could share and further develop my research. Such a site-specific, local teaching experience would engage the rich art tradition hiding in plain sight and function not as an exercise in canon insertion but as an investigation guided by a different paradigm. Through field trips to public art sites and to community arts and historic preservation organizations, students could engage with distinct and local stories that have been left out of mainstream US art history and explore more expansive praxes. CETA could guide us. Asawa, for instance, as both an advocate of arts education and a well-known artist, managed one of the largest local CETA projects, which put not only artists but also gardeners in schools, intertwining philosophies of art, teaching, growing, and living.⁵ Moreover, CETA offered opportunities to women artists who sought employment outside the home to support their families—and whose families participated in their work—such as the transformational performing artist Rhodessa Jones and muralist Susan Cervantes.

Looking at CETA and New Deal art in San Francisco with students, as we did at the convening, would introduce younger generations to histories of federally funded art and to the two pivotal and prolific eras of art making that emerged out of the specific texture and logic of the Bay Area itself. As we reckon with this year's devastating cuts to federal funding for the arts and its knockdown effect on state and local efforts, learning about how previous funding landscapes made opportunities for local vibrant art legacies is more important than ever.

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Notes

¹ For more on the concept of the local, see Julia Silverman and Mary McNeil, introduction to “Art History and the Local,” In the Round, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13157>.

² The Kearny Street Workshop is well known for its activism concerning the eviction of low-income residents from the single-room-occupancy International Hotel in Manilatown, San Francisco, in 1977. For more on the present activities of the Kearny Street Workshop, see <https://www.kearnystreet.org>.

³ The exhibition was titled *Angel Island: An Exhibition of the Chinese Experience at the Immigration Station*. My dissertation research focuses on Chinese American architectural interventions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, looking at intersections of landscape, memory, and history, with Angel Island as a particularly important case study.

⁴ “Opening Today,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7, 1979. It seems these exhibitions were untitled. Nancy Hom to Mary Okin, August 3, 2025.

⁵ John Kriedler, “The CETA Years, 1975–1980,” in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in Air*, ed. Timothy Anglin Burgard and Daniell Cornell, rev. ed. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and University of California Press, 2020). See also Janet Bishop and Cara Manes, eds., *Ruth Asawa: Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Yale University Press, 2025); and Jordan Troeller, *Ruth Asawa and the Artist-Mother at Midcentury* (MIT Press, 2025).